

ABC NIGHTLINE

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KOPPEL: Jack McWethy, walk us through the, the chronology and the methodology by which U.S. intelligence has come to believe that maybe there are MiGs aboard that Soviet ship. JOHN MCWETHY (ABC News): On one of the routine satellite passes that the U.S. does over the Soviet Union, in early October, they noted that there was a ship in a port in the Black Sea, and they noted that there were

some things on the docks. And they took a very careful look at the different crates on the docks and determined that they were the same kind of crates that the U.S. has seen before and that the Soviets have packed MiG, high-performance aircraft in. So they... The cloud cover came in for the next several days, and

when they next got a look at that in the Black Sea, the ship was gone and the crates were gone. So, ah, the U.S. intelligence community made the assumption at that time that the crates were put aboard the ship and that there were indeed

MiGs inside the crates. They began tracking the ship, ah, by use of American military aircraft and other means. It came out of the Mediterranean into the Atlantic, and instead of going through the Panama Canal, it went all the way around South America. They thought perhaps it was going to Peru, which is a client state of, ah, the Soviet Union, in terms of arms trade anyway. Except it

went right past Peru and headed straight for Nicaragua. So there are some questions that the U.S. has. Because it didn't go through the Panama Canal,

KOPPEL: If it had gone through the Panama Canal, would it have been subjected to a search, or what, what is the point of that? MCWETHY: Well, they have to provide, ah, the Panamanian authorities with a manifest of what is in the ship, and the Panamanians have the right to look in the hold of the ship. And the U.S. routinely has access to the things that the Panamanians find out when they search a ship.

KOPPEL: John Scali, this business of, of examining crates from the sky or, or deducing certain thing by looking at crates from the sky actually has a name, I am told. It is called cratology, and it goes back to the Cuban missile crisis time. Can you explain that to us a little bit? What is cratology? JOHN SCALI (ABC News): In the intelligence community, there are people who specialize in trying to determine what's inside a particular package and/or crate. They're called cratologists, and it's a highly exotic and specialized kind of art.

And, ah, if you recall, during the 1962 Cuban missiles crisis, it was experts of this

kind who decided that the Soviets had tried to sneak missiles into Cuba and, ah,

came up with this conclusion, not because they even saw the crates but because they saw the preparations for installation of medium- and long-range missiles. I must tell you, however, that, ah, I'm on the skeptical side. I feel that, ah,

it would be the worst kind of reckless behavior of the Soviet leadership at this

time to try and challenge a newly elected President Reagan in this rather crude and obvious way.

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KOPPEL: I am told that these particular crates that, ah, Jack McWethy was talking about a moment ago, ah, are uniquely designed for the shipment of MiG aircraft. Now, obviously, that doesn't mean that you have to put MiGs inside. Ah, you can put flower pots or, or lawn mowers inside. But why would they go through the business of using those crates and not put the MiGs inside? Have you got any thoughts on that, John? SCALI: It could be an effort by the Soviets to, ah, get us all heated up and excited about the possibility and then,

ah, ah, disclose for the world to see that there was nothing like this. On the other hand, one cannot rule out the possibility that the Kremlin leadership is guilty of a colossal misjudgment of, ah, President Reagan's determination. Because I think it's about a 99 percent certainty that if they really discover that there are MiGs being unloaded, ah, or indeed high-performance, jet combat aircraft of any kind, then it is about ah, 99 percent certain that the president will order some kind of military response.

KOPPEL: Now, Jack McWethy, ah, the question is if not MiGs, ah, is it possible that there is some other weaponry being sent in there? And if so, is it any of our business? MCWETHY: I think it's highly probable that this particular ship,

because of the route it took and because it is a Soviet vessel, ah, that it does

have some kind of military weaponry in it. Ah, the Soviets, by and large, have not used their own ships to send weapons to Nicaragua. When they use their own ships, they're sending humanitarian supplies or oil. Ah, this time there is reason to believe there are weapons. And one of the guesses that are being made

by the intelligence community is that it is a higher grade of anti-aircraft missile, a better anti-aircraft missile than, ah, the Nicaraguan regime has had access to before.

KOPPEL: To what end? Any speculation on that? MCWETHY: To what end? To provide, ah, ah, a more menacing threat to American surveillance of that country. The U.S., ah, routinely overflies Nicaraguan airspace to try and

gather intelligence. If they get better anti-aircraft missiles, ah, the United States could find itself with some planes shot down.

KOPPEL: Jack, ah, a difficult question for you to answer I know, but if, if you had to assign, based on your conversations with your sources, ah, a credibility rating of one to 10, with 10 being the highest, as to whether or not there are MiG aircraft on that ship, where would you put the credibility rating?

MCWETHY:

It's below 50 percent in the three or four range. The evidence is compelling circumstantial evidence. But you must weigh against that, ah, the logic of a very conservative Soviet decision-making apparatus. They usually are not foolhardy and, and not since the days of Khrushchev in making those kinds of decisions.

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KOPPEL: John Scali, let me bring to your attention something that I'm sure foreign minister D'Escoto will be talking about in a few minutes, and that is the, the repeated Nicaraguan charge that there is a U.S. invasion of Nicaragua planned. Now, obviously, no American official would be willing to concede that such were true, even if it were. But what kind of a, where, where would you put the probability rating there on a, on a 1-to-10 scale? SCALI: I'd put it about, about a two. The, ah, Nicaraguans have been yelling about an American invasion plan for many months. And it has become almost folklore to say that once Ronald Reagan, ah, is re-elected, then he will be, ah, rid of all inhibitions and then will resort to his, ah, true warmonger character. I don't believe that. And I don't see any need for the United States to use military force until and unless the Soviets try to challenge the United States frontally in this way.

KOPPEL: OK. John Scali, Jack McWethy, thank you very much for joining us. When we come back, we'll talk live with Nicaragua's foreign minister, Miguel D'Escoto, in Managua.

KOPPEL: We invited the Reagan administration to send a representative to discuss this issue with us tonight, but they declined. Joining us live now from Managua, Nicaragua, is that country's foreign minister, Miguel D'Escoto. Mr. Foreign Minister, any, ah, MiG aircraft in your country? MIGUEL D'ESCOTO (Nicarguan foreign minister): No, we have no MiG aircraft.

KOPPEL: Why do you think it is that the Reagan administration is raising questions? As you've heard, it it is not made as a categorical statement, but there is circumstantial evidence that certainly raises questions in, in the minds of Americans. Ah, why do you think these charges have been raised at this point? D'ESTCOTO: Well, I don't know myself whether they are circumstantial evidence or not. What I know is that the Reagan administration has been, for a very long time, ah, trying to discredit the image of the Nicaraguan revolution in order to render less condemnable, so they hope, their official policy of hostility and crimes against the Nicaraguan people, against the Nicaraguan revolution. Especially, I believe that, ah, been, having been unable to discredit our democratic elections that were just celebrated over last weekend and havin' been upset I believe because of the overwhelming number of participants in this electoral process and because of the victory of the friends of Sandinista, they are trying to throw some new element to attract the attention of the international public opinion and make it look as if Nicaragua, ah, in spite of its election and in spite of the fact that it accepted the Contadora proposal, that we are supposed to be some type of a, a threat, ah, to peace in the region. And therefore, the United States, ah, according to this logic, they hope that the people would conclude that they are quite justified in carrying on with the illegal and immoral and criminal policy against our people.

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KOPPEL: All right. D'ESCOTO: I think that's the reason.

KOPPEL: You, you have raised, Mr. Foreign Minister, the issue of logic. Let's atay with a little logic. Why would that Soviet freighter travel thousands of miles out of its way, around the southern tip of South America, in order to get to your country when it could have come through the Panama Canal? D'ESCOTO: I don't know. You would have to ask them that. I have no idea.

KOPPEL: Doesn't make any sense, though, does it? D'ESCOTO: I'm not sure if it makes sense or not, but it...

KOPPEL: I mean it makes, it makes sense if they have something to hide. It makes sense, if as John McWethy suggested... D'ESCOTO: Well, I, I can, I can tell you, as we have already said... You asked me if there MiGs in Nicaragua. We had spoken, not spoken anything about the Soviet freighter, but I can then go on to say that it is absolutely untrue that we have received in the last few days or ever, for that matter, or are receiving today or are waiting for some MiGs to arrive on any boat from anypalce. It is totally untrue.

KOPPEL: Now, let me, uh, let me just say by way of introduciton to the question that I recognize it's none of my business, but it might be in your interest to tell me then what is aboard that Soviet ship. D'ESCOTO: Well, let me finish what I was saying about the, the MiGs. Let me tell you that we believe that sovereign nations have rights that have little or nothing to do with imperial whims, and that we are a sovereign nation that are under attack. Daily our people are being killed, are being murdered by these mercenaries financed by the Central Intelligence Agency. We have every right in the world. The fact that we're smaller than the United States doesn't mean that we have, don't have the right to procure whatever we need to ensure our sovereignty, to defend our sovereignty and territorial integrity. And I beleive, I for myself believe that if we ever came to the conclusion that we needed MiGs, MiGs to defend ourselves from aggression, that we have every right and even duty to try to get whatever we need, including MiGs. There's nothing in international law that says that one country should dictate to another what it can and cannot get. Where does the United States get the right to do this?

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